

GROWERTALKS

Acres & Acres

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New School or Old School?

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As I was typing this on my MacBook Pro and reading these words on a 27-in. 4K monitor (to ease eye strain), my email binged, and when I checked it, I found an email from music industry blogger Bob Lefsetz. His “Lefsetz Letter” is read by everybody in the music and tech biz, and it’s full of insights about the past, present and future of music.

The biggest part of the future he keeps preaching is that physical music media is dead. Subscription streaming services (like Spotify) are the future. If you’re still buying CDs, you’re in a tiny minority of Luddites. Even the 99-cent digital download is in danger, says Bob.

Of course, you might ask, why does it matter? If someone wants to buy CDs, or even vinyl, why shouldn’t they?

That’s true for consumers—to a point. But as a business, your success depends upon discovering the future and leading your customers to it. If phone makers only gave us what we’d grown comfortable with, we’d all still be telephoning like Andy Griffith instead of enjoying the benefits of smartphones.

That MacBook I mentioned? No internal CD drive. Apple dropped them years ago, betting on music, movies and software being delivered via the Internet. I missed it and now I don’t. Us consumers get used to new stuff pretty quickly and we’d rarely go back. Care to give up your smartphone? I didn’t think so.

Yet almost as an antidote to all this technology, we’ve seen a continued interest in vintage, authentic products. Think “Fixer Upper” on HGTV, with farmhouse style, rusty metal, chipped paint. Handmade, limited edition, local, ultra-high-quality are all in vogue, as a counterpoint to the bombardment of technology and the impersonality of Amazon and big box stores.

Two of the trendy new flower vendors, Farmgirl Flowers and Flowers for Dreams, use burlap to wrap most of their arrangements. Burlap? Does it get any lower-tech?

Which direction should you be taking your business? New school high-tech or old-school authentic? You have

to choose because staying in the middle of the road is a sure way to get run over.

If you want to be perceived as a high-tech business, I see several opportunities. The first is energy efficiency. You should be utilizing some alternative energy, such as solar and wind. Not necessarily for everything, but at least enough to be able to say you're "50% energy independent" or some such thing. Your vehicle fleet, too, needs to be clean and efficient. Natural gas or biodiesel. And you should brag about it.

Computer systems: You should have the best. You know when you walk into an office and see a bunch of old-school beige tube monitors? Not inspiring. A bank of flat screens on modern chrome mounts indicates a company on the move! Same for your online presence. It should be the best in the business.

Your products should be sleek and cutting edge. In fact, they should make some of your customers a bit uncomfortable. That's what I love about painted and dyed plants: they make some folks squirm just a bit. That's when you know you're on the right track. The iPhone made a lot of folks squirm with its soap bar shape. Future generations will never know what a landline or flip phone is.

Conversely, if you're going to take your business in the hand-crafted, boutique route, you should express that image everywhere, from your lettering to your corporate color choices, staff clothing, etc. Your product offering should be simplified. A friendly human should answer your phone.

You should stock fewer, better products, and maybe you run out of them now and again. That keeps interest high. Limited editions of the newest stuff. Thirty-plus years in the flower business has taught me that customers care most that you have good stuff when they need it; price is a distant second to that. Offer them something extra cool and they'll leap at the chance to have it ahead of their competition.

One thing both styles of business have in common: The human touch. There was a time when an automated phone attendant was the epitome of high tech. Now it's the epitome of a company that doesn't care. No matter which direction you choose, personalized customer service that exceeds your customers' expectations is still the best way to ensure your company's future. **GT**